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EULOGY
ON
SILAS WRIGHT,
BY
HENRY D. GILPIN.



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EULOGY

ON

SILAS WRIGHT,

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

YOUNG MEN'S DEMOCRATIC ASSOCIATION

OF THE

CITY AND COUNTY OF PHILADELPHIA,

On the 12th of November, 1847,

BY

HENRY D. GILPIN.

PHILADELPHIA :

UNITED STATES BOOK AND JOB PRINTING OFFICE, LEDGER BUILDING.

1847.

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Philadelphia, November 19, 1847.

DEAR SIR :

The undersigned, committee on behalf of "The Young Men's Democratic Association of the City and County of Philadelphia," respectfully request a copy of the Eulogy pronounced by you in the Upper Saloon of the Philadelphia Museum, on the life and character of the late Silas Wright, feeling assured that those of our citizens who had not the opportunity of hearing the same, feel a lively interest in its publication.

We also take this opportunity of returning to you our heartfelt thanks, for the kind manner in which you consented to become the medium through which the young Democracy of the City and County could convey a tribute of affection to the memory of their beloved Wright, and in bequeathing to our country a paper that must become a part of its history.

We are, with sentiments of high respect,

Your friends and fellow citizens,

HENRY W. BROWN,
THOMAS H. BREEN,
CHARLES S. WHITEMAN,
WILLIAM RANKIN,
M. J. DAUGHERTY.

The Hon. HENRY D. GILPIN.



Philadelphia, November 20, 1847.

GENTLEMEN :

In sending you a copy of my Address, I cannot lose the occasion to express to the Association my sincere acknowledgments for the favor with which it was received, and to assure them, that while no office could be more grateful to my feelings than to commemorate the virtues of such a man, that gratification was largely increased by knowing it was done at the instance of those who so warmly and justly admired and honored him.

With great respect,

Your friend and fellow citizen,

HENRY D. GILPIN.

TO HENRY W. BROWN, THOMAS H. BREEN, CHARLES S. WHITEMAN, WILLIAM RANKIN, and M. J. DAUGHERTY, Esquires.

*Officers of the Young Men's Democratic Association of the City
and County of Philadelphia.*

PRESIDENT,

MARTIN J. DAUGHERTY, ESQ.

VICE-PRESIDENTS,

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Second " HUGH McGOLDRICK.
Third " LABAN S. BURKHART.
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E U L O G Y .

MR. PRESIDENT AND GENTLEMEN :

In complying with your invitation, I have only to lament my inability adequately to delineate the life, and portray the character of that great statesman and excellent man, to whose worth the expression, which we have so lately witnessed, of admiration and regret, so general and spontaneous, is a tribute from his country as honorable as it must be sincere. Bound to him by the ties of a personal friendship, which it was ever my pride and happiness to cherish, and regarding with uniform respect his sentiments on all important public questions, I might reasonably distrust my own estimate of his character, and my judgment of his actions. But the narrative of his life, gathered from sources that are authentic ; the evidences of his patriotism, his genius, the wisdom of his counsels, and his private virtues, drawn from records readily accessible to us all, will present a picture that friendship need not flatter, and individual judgment is unable to exaggerate. This, and this only, it shall be my effort faithfully to accomplish.

SILAS WRIGHT was born on the 24th of May, 1795, at Amherst, a village in the state of Massachusetts. The scene of his birth is one of those spots whose beauties allure the lover of nature ; and the character, pursuits and habits of its people exhibit all the features that mark a community where genius needs no guide nor aid, in its progress to honorable distinction, but industry, integrity, patriotism and a wise ambition. From the hill, on whose sloping side the village rests, the eye wanders over the fertile valley of the Connecticut, which is spread around and below. Small farms, the

freeholds of those by whose labor they have become the patterns of a skilful husbandry, lie side by side, far as the sight can reach, seldom parted even by a hedge-row; and village succeeds to village, each crowned with its heaven-directed spire, rising from a circle of venerable elms, beneath whose shade the public school has not failed, through years long past, to gather the offspring of successive generations. No antiquated customs or institutions check or prevent the aspirations and success of honest and industrious poverty; no arbitrary laws limit the just distribution of property or sow the seeds of domestic rivalry; no privileges of class draw harsh lines of discrimination in the exercise of political and social rights; and the same education develops and nourishes, with equal and jealous care, the seeds of intellect and morals among those who are favored with much or little of this world's goods. Nor have events been wanting to connect with the scene, by vivid association, striking lessons of piety, patriotism, and patient even stern republican confidence and virtue. When fierce Indian warriors far outnumbered the first adventurers into the wilderness, humble churches, whose sites are yet reverently pointed out, were reared in its recesses, and no dread of the savage interrupted the due solemnity of Christian worship; when England was hurrying to the scaffold the judges who had condemned her arbitrary monarch, neither royal favor, nor wealth, nor power could bring danger to their associates who passed securely the lengthened evening of life in the hamlets of this valley; and when, in later days, the great contest of modern liberty was fought—the contest for the preservation of real and absolute self government—every town that encircles the heights of Amherst hastened to enrol its sons under the standard of the young republic.

In these scenes the forefathers of Mr. Wright had dwelt for more than a century; in these habits and principles they had been bred; in these toils, adventures, and patriotic duties they had largely shared. Born in the midst of such a community, the toilsome occupations and the narrow fortunes of his parents cast no gloomy shadow

over his childhood ; nor did they retard the early development of an intellect more than usually bright, and a temper of whose gentleness and serenity domestic tradition has cherished the fondest recollections. His home indeed was humble, his advantages were few, his patrimony was nothing ; but yet the picture impressed most early on his imagination, was that of tranquil nature and well rewarded industry ; the lesson he imbibed unconsciously from every thing around him, was that of honest and contented labor ; and reverence to God and integrity to man could scarce have failed to be among the first emotions that warmed his heart. The seed was early sown that produced, at a later day, the blossom and the fruit.

While Mr. Wright was yet quite young, his father removed his residence to Vermont, which had been received not long before into the Union, and was chiefly settled by emigrants from Massachusetts and the rest of New England, who carried with them the habits, and adopted, in a new region, the pursuits and manners of their former homes. No record of his school-boy days has been preserved ; tradition seems to have treasured no anecdotes to indicate in his youth the promises of his future eminence ; nor is it till his sixteenth year that we are able to trace his occupations with certainty or distinctness. In 1811 he entered the college at Middlebury, in Vermont ; and in 1815 he completed his course of study, with a reputation for ability more than usually high. It was in this interval, that the war with Great Britain made the shores of Lake Champlain the scene of one of those gallant battles, in which the sturdy bravery of men, cheerfully and suddenly leaving for the time their peaceful occupations, proved itself more than equal to veteran discipline and far superior numbers. The father of Mr. Wright, his elder brother, and the husbands of two of his sisters, were among the Vermont volunteers, in the victory at Plattsburg, whose gallantry and services were especially noticed by the commander in chief.

On leaving college, he commenced at once the study of the law, to which he devoted nearly four years with characteristic zeal ; so much so, as seriously to impair his health, and to require, on the

completion of his term, an entire relaxation for several months. These he passed in a tour on horseback through the northern and western parts of New York, and it was in the course of his wanderings that he selected the village of Canton, which is near its extreme border in the county of St. Lawrence, as the place of his future residence. There he settled in October, 1819, and continued to live till his death. The early years of a young village lawyer, passed in a neighborhood remote from commerce and thinly peopled, cheered by no patronage even of family connections, must needs leave but a meagre history of professional distinction; yet there are not wanting numerous testimonials of the clearness of intelligence which he displayed from the outset; of his winning powers as an advocate; and especially of his strict and fearless integrity—his undeviating fairness—in every relation in which he was called upon to act. Personal esteem and confidence he secured at once; and his immediate selection for the principal village offices, however humble in themselves, was evidence of these sentiments; it was an early indication of that popularity, quickly rising to a deeper and warmer interest, on the part of those who must have known him best, which it was his good fortune never to lose or even to diminish.

In the year 1823, he commenced, at the age of twenty-eight, that career of public service in which he continued to advance, equally with benefit to his country and honor to himself, until the close of his life. From his youth his political associations had been with the democratic party. Though temperate in manner and forbearing in his judgment of others, his sentiments were at all times candidly expressed; and the frankness of his character, and his disposition calmly but freely to examine and discuss every topic of public interest, had made his opinions well known, as they had disclosed the grounds on which they were adopted. To this perhaps may be attributed the rare occurrence, that he was elected to the Senate of the State from a county where the opposite political party had previously maintained an unquestioned ascendancy, but where from that time he ever received undeviating support. He took his

seat as a Senator, at Albany, on the 6th of January, 1824, for a term of four years.

Mr. Wright was probably the youngest member of an assembly in which were men eminent for ability and trained by experience; yet it was not long before the vigor of his reasoning and the acuteness of his intelligence gave him a position inferior to none. He showed himself constant and patient in attendance; quick to discern the effects of every measure proposed; fearless of responsibility when convinced of its propriety; not shrinking from radical changes which the public good appeared to demand. By his political friends he was recognized as a skilful and faithful leader; by men of every party he was respected for the sterling qualities of his mind and the general wisdom of his judgment. It was owing, in no small degree, to his exertions, that an actual movement was made in the revision and modification of the statutes; he gave to the portion of that valuable labor which was submitted to the legislature during his term, a minute, judicious, and most useful supervision; he was mainly instrumental in submitting to the people those amendments of the constitution which extended the right of suffrage, and gave them the choice, in every neighborhood, of their local magistrates. He began early to exercise an anxious attention to the revenue and finances; and, above all, he succeeded in securing that limitation on expenditures for works of internal improvement, which, while adhered to, was of infinite value to the credit, resources and wealth of the state, as its abandonment seriously injured them. When her magnificent canals were begun, not only were the works themselves definitely designated; but a fund was set aside, at the outset, for the payment of the interest on the debt to be incurred in their construction; and their proceeds, after completion, were appropriated to extinguish it. Scarcely, however, were these works finished, when numerous applications for others were pressed upon the legislature. These he took the lead in resisting. He had voted for the loans required to complete the Erie and Champlain Canals; but he saw that to construct those now proposed, a debt must be incurred which

could be liquidated only by increased taxation. He urged perseverance in the system adopted at first: to husband the resources of the state, and when the cost of the profitable works was paid, then, and not till then, to apply their revenues to other improvements. His views were sustained by the legislature: for several subsequent years they were adhered to: and, when departed from, the result verified all his predictions. Such was the discharge of his first legislative trust: and safely may it be said that in it he contributed, in more than a common share, to the welfare of the state.

Before his senatorial term was concluded, and in anticipation of that event, he was chosen a representative in Congress from the district in which he lived. The election took place in November, 1826, and on the 3d of December, 1827, he repaired to Washington. At that period the principal subject of legislative discussion was the regulation of duties on imports. In the state of New York, and especially in its northern districts, the people generally, and more particularly the farming population, were of opinion that an adjustment of the tariff should be made, so as to extend additional protection to the agricultural and mineral staples of that region, as well as to manufactures: and the state Legislature, without a dissenting voice, adopted resolutions to that effect, which were transmitted by the Governor to the senators and representatives in Congress, requesting their exertions to effect this object. As soon as Mr. Wright took his seat, he was placed on the Committee on Manufactures. He found a majority in favor of an alteration of the existing tariff, though not desirous of so general an extension of the protective policy as was advocated by some of the members, among whom was the chairman. The principal labor of the committee was, from this circumstance, devolved upon him, and by him its report to Congress was prepared. Though it certainly expressed opinions more favorable to the protective policy than his mature judgment ratified, as he afterwards candidly acknowledged in the Senate, yet it was less directed to their advocacy than to the exhibition and arrangement of statistical facts, and especially of those

supposed to be more immediately connected with the agricultural interest. In the debates that followed, his place necessarily became particularly prominent; and the clearness with which he presented the details of his dry and complicated subject, the simplicity of his diction and his lucid arrangement, at once secured for him a high reputation in a body where he was suddenly called to take the lead, on the great topic of the day. He was compared with, or required to encounter some of the most celebrated of American statesmen. He saw seated in the same assembly Livingston, Randolph, Everett, Buchanan, McDuffie, Rives and others, not more distinguished for force of intellectual vigor than readiness and power in debate. The views he advocated were challenged alike by the supporters of a high protective system, armed with an infinity of details, skilfully presented; and by those who opposed it, however modified, with the strenuous force of logical deduction and scientific illustration. He proved himself equal to the encounter, and the first session in which he sat in Congress, and the first debate in which his abilities were displayed, raised him, by general consent, into the chief rank of public men. With characteristic modesty, however, he rather withdrew from the conspicuous position which his reputation would have authorized him to assume; and although the traces are numerous of his industrious devotion to business, and he is not seldom the advocate of measures, sometimes indicating the generosity of his sentiments in cases that elicited personal sympathy, and sometimes evincing his wise foresight and caution; yet he appears in general to have preferred to reserve for a more extensive legislative experience, his frequent participation in debate.

To this, however, he was not now destined. Though he was re-elected to Congress for a second term, yet before the first had entirely expired he was called, by the choice of the legislature of New York, to occupy one of the most important posts in its executive government. In January, 1829, he was appointed Comptroller—the officer to whom is entrusted the management of the finances of the commonwealth—and that office he continued to fill for the four

succeeding years. Mr. Van Buren was then its Governor, and had shortly before submitted to the legislature a plan for the establishment of a Safety Fund, to protect the creditors of insolvent banks; it was the first of those excellent measures, designed to guard the community against the risks incidental to a paper currency, by which his administrations of the State and Union were so peculiarly distinguished. His acceptance, soon afterwards, of the office of Secretary of State, withdrew him from its personal supervision, or even its practical and incipient organization. He knew, however, that this would be faithfully and ably performed. Though it was mainly confided to commissioners, whose functions formed a part of the system, yet in addition to this he was thoroughly apprized of, and relied upon the ability of the chief financial officer of the State, and as such, incidentally and necessarily connected with it; and certainly no one could feel a deeper interest or a higher satisfaction than Mr. Wright, in contributing to promote the judicious plans of that patriotic statesman, in whose political opinions he intimately participated, and with whom the strongest ties of warm personal friendship, never afterwards impaired, had already been formed. For this, and for every branch of his official trust as Comptroller, he displayed an eminent fitness; and he largely if not chiefly contributed to suggest and establish, in various and useful details, that excellent system in the management of the public moneys of the state, to which it owes so much of its well doing and credit.

Among Mr. Wright's many services at this period of his life, one act should not pass unnoticed. It is not, indeed, connected with his official trust, but it is remarkable alike for the spirit of comprehensive patriotism from which it sprung, and the important benefits to the peace and harmony of the Union, which were its results. The difficulties that had arisen in the state of Georgia, from the existence of an Indian tribe within its limits, imperfectly subjected to its laws, and indeed asserting the right to defy them, and to exercise therein an independent sovereignty, had ended in the imprisonment, under the State laws, but at variance with the

judgment of the Supreme Court of the United States, of two missionaries who resided among the Indians. A collision so seriously threatened, between that high tribunal and a state of the Union, was fraught with alarming forebodings to every patriot, and seemed to Mr. Wright to authorize the efforts, even of private citizens, for its peaceful adjustment. In this spirit he addressed to the Governor of Georgia a private letter ; he was joined in so doing by two of his most intimate personal friends and associates, then at Albany, Mr. Flagg and Mr. Dix—men since honorably distinguished by many services to their state and to the Union. He reviewed the question in its various bearings with a force of reasoning, calmness and temper, united to a due regard for the rights, welfare and privileges of the state, as a sovereign member of the confederacy, which, when other attempts had failed, produced a happy termination of the threatening controversy. His interference was undertaken with much hesitation, but under the impulses of an anxious patriotism ; indeed, it was not generally known until some time after the event, when the letter was made public without his knowledge.

In the year 1832, Mr. Marcy, at that time a Senator in Congress from the State of New York, was elected Governor, and on the meeting of the legislature in the following winter, Mr. Wright was chosen to be his successor. He resigned the office of Comptroller, and took his seat in the Senate of the United States on the 14th of January, 1833. Being afterwards twice re-elected, when his terms expired, he continued to occupy that elevated station for nearly twelve successive years ; and it was there that he attained to that fulness of reputation to which the exhibition of his talents and conduct in so conspicuous a scene necessarily led. Nor is it too much to say, that no period in the history of the Union has been marked by occurrences so memorable in its domestic annals as this—so exciting in their nature, so important in their results. The public measures and political events which followed each other in rapid succession, tested to an extent of which many feared the conse-

quences, every important provision of the constitution; and they also proved that the wisdom of those who framed it had prepared it for emergencies, in every branch of its operation, which no foresight could have expected to arise so early and in forms so various. Nor are these events more to be noticed for their intrinsic influence on our institutions, or the deep and anxious interest they excited throughout the nation, than for the eloquence and talent with which they were discussed by a body of statesmen who will probably occupy, in the pages of our future history, positions scarcely inferior to any that have been reached by those of their own or the preceding age.

The threatening aspect of the controversy in South Carolina had fortunately given place to a prospect of returning harmony, just as Mr. Wright entered the Senate: and it was alike congenial to his feelings and his judgment that, representing as he did the sovereignty of so great a state, almost his first act should be to aid by his influence in its complete restoration. He assented to, and even advocated changes in the existing revenue laws, greater than under other circumstances he would have thought expedient. He did so because he deemed them necessary to secure the cordial harmony of the States. "I may render myself," he said, "obnoxious to the charge of legislating under the influence of fear—but are there not considerations of a proper nature to justify me? There is in some parts of the country a strong and deep expression of discontent at our legislation on the subject of the tariff. These discontents, it is not to be concealed, have risen to a height which threatens the peace of the country and the integrity of the Union. The hostile attitude of a sister state towards the country, induces me to do what we are now bound to do; a refusal to do it will endanger the integrity of the Union. This measure will bring back harmony to the country, and I believe it to be just and proper to yield much to effect that object. The time has come when the revenue ought to be reduced—even the revenue on protected articles. This single measure for effecting that reduction is presented to me for my accept-

ance or rejection. Defective as it is in many respects, I take it as a satisfactory concession to all that portion of the south which believes the existing laws to be unjust and oppressive. I think it a measure necessary for the peace of the country, and all its defects sink out of my sight.”

In this truly liberal and fraternal spirit did this great man, though reared in the northern extremity of the Union, allied to all the interests of that section, and wielding the influence and possessing the confidence of the most populous of its states, begin his career in the Senate, and act a chief part in the fulfilment of a main purpose for which it was constituted by the framers of the confederacy—the preservation of the harmonious action of the States.

On the 4th of March, 1833, General Jackson entered on his second Presidential term, and in the following autumn the public moneys were withdrawn, by his direction, from the custody of the Bank of the United States. The question on which political opinion was then most strenuously agitated and divided, was the renewal or termination of that institution, as the fiscal agent of the government; and this measure of the Executive, so unequivocal in its character, created an excitement never surpassed in our domestic politics. In the midst of this excitement Congress met. In the Senate there was a majority of the opponents of the administration. Its great leader was confident alike in the resources of his ready and powerful eloquence, and in the tried devotion of that large portion of the people whose enthusiastic support he had lately received. He was sustained by colleagues long practised in legislative conduct—some strong in intellectual vigor—several well skilled in fluent debate—even a few were not wanting to exhibit a fiercer tone of crimination and attack, than had ever before characterized the discussions of the American Senate. That body was scarcely organized, when a resolution was passed asking the President to communicate to the Senate, the written views expressed to the members of his cabinet, when the custody of the public moneys was changed. The request was met by an immediate refusal from the President, and a

denial of their authority to require from the Executive such a communication. Then commenced that ardent and memorable conflict, which lasted through the principal part of the session, and was terminated by a vote censuring the conduct of the Executive, as having been in derogation of the constitution and laws.

It was not for some weeks after this debate commenced, that Mr. Wright participated in it. Vindicated as the administration was by a band of statesmen, inferior indeed in numbers to their opponents, but trained in the business of Congress, and thoroughly versed in the history and policy of the country—by the powerful reasoning, the vigorous courage and exhaustless information of Benton; by the admirable talent of Forsyth, who united, in a degree seldom surpassed, every various quality of an accomplished debater, as he excelled in the attractive manners and manly spirit of a gentleman; by the excellent sense and keen perception of Grundy, lighting up every topic with the flashes of a ready humor, and disclosing with inimitable skill the plausible weaknesses of his opponents—vindicated as it was by these great men, and others scarcely less conspicuous or efficient, Mr. Wright, with the modesty of one who felt that he had as yet but slight legislative experience, refrained for a time from taking a prominent part. At length his official duty called on him to present resolutions of the legislature of his own state, which sustained in every point the conduct of the Executive. In doing this his position in the Senate was fixed at once. His speech was scarcely commenced when it arrested the attention of his opponents; it developed his sentiments, with simplicity indeed, but marked candor and ability; and, passing beyond the mere topics of more usual controversy, it threw a broad clear light over the whole subject of fiscal agency; it challenged and required an elaborate reply. Few men have risen so early and easily, by general consent, to so eminent a place in the party to which they have attached themselves; he was classed at once among its leading men, and from that time regarded as inferior to none of them. Eloquent, in one sense, he may not have been, for no language was ever more unstudied—no

address was less ornamented by imagination, or even adorned by any extrinsic illustration; but, in fixing the attention of his hearers, in impressing them with a conviction of the truth of his opinion, in leading them unconsciously through the train of an argument, in reality the most logical but in appearance the least so, no one in Congress ever surpassed him. The arrangement of every topic, direct or collateral, was lucid; there was an evident fulness and completeness in his own information, of which no doubt suggested itself to the listener; an impression was always left that he meant to be less an advocate than a judge, who did not shrink from or evade, or lessen the force of any position to which he was not willing to assent, but weighed it and then decided against it. Neither his opinions, nor the reasons by which he sustained them, bore the mark of sudden impulse; and those who concurred in the same general sentiments with him, felt that the ground on which he placed them was that on which all would prefer that they should rest, after the oscillations of temporary excitement had subsided. He was not a cold, though perhaps not an impassioned speaker; on the contrary, his deep interest in the subject of debate was evident, and he spoke as one acting from strong convictions. His temper was not easily ruffled, and his courtesy was invariable, because it sprung from a nature never ungenerous. He seemed to secure so much respect that the instances were few, perhaps none can be recalled, in which, although a constant debater, in stormy times, and adopting always, and asserting his opinions without the least hesitation, he was called upon to retort a sarcasm or repel a personality; yet no one could be more prompt or happy in reply, however suddenly required, in the progress of debate. In his tone and deportment there was a dignity so striking, but still so natural and unpretending, that while it repelled levity and secured attention, it never approached to the slightest appearance of ostentation; and the impression which remained most strongly in the minds of those who heard him, was that of his sincerity, his fairness, his deep convictions, and his anxious search for truth. Erant in eo summa verborum et gravitas et ele-

gantia; in disserendo mira explicatio: atque hæc omnia vitæ decorabat dignitas et integritas. Quantum pondus in verbis! Quam nihil non consideratum exhibat ex ore!

The influence thus early acquired in the Senate was never lessened. It increased with his more frequent share in its business and debates; and not only in the progress and up to the close of the fierce controversy in which his powers were so signally displayed, but in the important series of measures connected with domestic and foreign policy, throughout President Jackson's term, his counsels came to be regarded with especial confidence by the party whose doctrines he represented and espoused, and his speeches remain as expositions, unsurpassed in ability or authority, of the grounds on which they were advocated. Scarcely a topic within the range of general legislation failed to receive his notice; an array of essential and digested facts, always at command, gave weight to his suggestions; and on the more important questions that so greatly influenced the business and policy of his country, his speeches were masterly and comprehensive in argument and fact, as they were ever characterized by a spirit eminently patriotic. In one branch of legislation he may be said to have arrived, during this period, at the highest place—that connected with the finances; his knowledge was so extensive and accurate, his general views were so sound and his expositions so perspicuous, that, in the discussions relating to it, his opinions were received by the whole Senate with the most marked consideration.

When, therefore, Mr. Van Buren became President in 1837, and was found to have the support of a majority in the Senate, Mr. Wright was, by their general assent, assigned to the charge of that important subject, and placed at the head of the Committee on Finance. Recent events contributed to make that post, which is at all times arduous, then more than usually so. Congress was convened in advance of its regular time of meeting, in consequence of a sudden and general suspension of specie payments, in the month of May, 1837, by the banks throughout the United States, and, among

them, by all those having the custody of the public moneys. An occurrence of so grave a character at once led Mr. Wright, as it did other statesmen, to the opinion that the period should not longer be postponed of putting an end to all agency of those institutions in the management of the public money; and when, on the meeting of Congress, the President recommended that course, in a memorable message which will ever remain a monument of a sound philosophy, calmly proposed and unanswerably vindicated in the midst of conflicting suggestions and the highest excitement, Mr. Wright seconded his views, and framed and introduced the bill for the establishment of an Independent Treasury. That a measure so radical in its character, and changing in so marked a manner the system, practised from the beginning of the government, should be combatted at every stage, is far from surprising; but to no one could its principal advocacy have been better entrusted than to Mr. Wright; and, if its progress was impeded by delay and even occasional defeat, he yet had the satisfaction to see it at last placed upon the statute book, before the administration of Mr. Van Buren closed. Although subsequently repealed for a time, and again restored, in the vicissitudes of party ascendancy, there seems little risk in affirming that, in principle and substance—even if it should be modified in form—this great measure is firmly incorporated into the financial system of the United States.

Although, however, it may be regarded as the most prominent in its character and ultimate consequences of any adopted during that administration, yet there were many other questions that excited at the time a degree of interest scarcely less absorbing; and the ardor of party conflict, especially towards the close of Congress, has seldom been exceeded. In most of these discussions Mr. Wright constantly participated, and, not only from his conspicuous official station, but even more from the confidence reposed in him by those with whom he acted, and his relations arising from long political association, similarity of opinions and uninterrupted personal friendship with the President, he came to be peculiarly regarded as expressing, in

general, the views of the majority of the Senate, if not of the administration. And though, perhaps, it cannot be properly said, organized as are the houses of the American Congress, that he was the leader of that majority, it is yet certain that on no other member was devolved so large a share of labor and responsibility, as none watched with such unceasing attention, and discussed with more prompt ability, every subject of debate.

If that responsibility was lessened by the change of parties in 1841, this did not diminish his labors. Several of the laws, deemed by him most valuable, and for the adoption of which he had so strenuously exerted himself, were vigorously attacked; a general course of policy was pursued at variance with that which he had advocated: and, flushed with victory, the successful party found in the measures of their predecessors a topic of constant comparison and reproach. At every stage of these proceedings, Mr. Wright was conspicuous in opposition, and perhaps he displayed, at this time, and during the three following years through which he remained in the Senate, more marked ability in his examination of these and other measures then brought forward, than at any preceding period of his congressional life.

His term in the Senate had not expired, when he was called on by obligations that could not, as he thought, be resisted, to retire from that body, though it was in every respect the public station most gratifying to his ambition and congenial to his taste. On several occasions during the administrations of General Jackson and Mr. Van Buren, he is understood to have declined executive offices of high distinction; and President Tyler, whose public measures he had not unfrequently opposed, offered him, with a just discrimination, a place in the Supreme Court of the United States. Though in general he had withdrawn from the practice of his profession, since he had been in Congress, yet he had sometimes appeared as counsel in important cases before that high tribunal, and there displayed as well the information and science, as the sound and acute judgment which could not have failed to render him illustrious on a

bench where Marshall had sat, and Taney would have been his associate. This appointment, however, he also declined. Nor was it only from offices depending on executive selection that he withdrew. When the convention met at Baltimore, in May, 1844, to choose candidates for the approaching election, the strongest disposition existed, among a large portion of the delegates, to nominate him for the Presidential office; but, in anticipation of such an occurrence, he had communicated to a member, by whom it was made known, his fixed determination not to become a candidate. To this he was induced, as he stated, equally by a sense of public duty and private obligation. He had, on every occasion, expressed the wish and expectation that Mr. Van Buren might be again called to that distinguished office—not more from admiration of his personal abilities and talents, and confidence in his political opinions, than from the belief that his nomination was desired by a large majority of those whose sentiments the convention was intended to express. When, afterwards, he was himself actually selected by acclamation for the Vice-Presidency, an office in regard to which his determination had not been previously expressed, and the same circumstances controlling his sense of duty and feeling were not thought to apply, he could not be prevailed upon to serve; though he gave, as is well known, to the distinguished citizen of Pennsylvania on whom the choice then fell, his zealous approbation. Nor was this disinterested conduct the mere rejection of an empty honor, or the indulgence of a querulous discontent. He had every reason to expect, as was realized in the result, that on the candidates thus brought forward the highest trusts of the republic would be certainly conferred; and, as soon as they were nominated, he hastened, in the most generous and patriotic spirit, to rally in their favor, by his public and personal appeals, the popular support. If proofs were wanting of the magnanimity of his nature, the sincerity of his friendship, of patriotism free from selfishness, and ambition tempered by unusual moderation, are they not found in actions such as these? And has it not, by the consenting voice of his country,

happened to him as to the great Fabius of ancient days, that the just glory of honors so declined surpasses any which their acceptance could confer?

When Congress adjourned, he believed that nothing was left to interfere with his continuance in the Senate, but in this he was destined soon to be disappointed; he had scarcely reached New York when he found himself strongly urged to accept a nomination as Governor of the State: and this, not merely on grounds connected with that office, but because it was thought that such a sacrifice of inclination on his part was necessary, if not indispensable, to secure the success in the national, as well as the state election, of the party whose policy he approved. After endeavoring, with sincere anxiety, to withdraw himself from this necessity, he reluctantly yielded, and was elected by the largest vote that has ever been given in that state in favor of any candidate for any office.

If the merits and patriotism of a statesman are to be tested by the embarrassments that surround him, the zeal with which he encounters them, the sacrifices he suffers and the good he achieves, then have the two years, during which Mr. Wright was Governor of New York, contributed most to his fame. As this was the closing period of his public service, so is it the epoch which those who admire and esteem him regard with most admiration and pride; and as it was followed, for the first time in his public life, by the loss of popular support, it offers the testimony to his patriotism which alone was wanting—that he never sought to gain or retain popularity, office or power, by the sacrifice of duty. To his lot it fell to perform two most difficult of all tasks required from an executive officer—the one, to vindicate violated laws, of which the imperfection and even injustice are the incipient cause of their violation; the other, to hold back the too rapid impulses of successful and useful enterprise, where present benefits seem to justify and demand that they should be seconded rather than checked.

In more than one of the states, serious troubles have arisen from the remnants of colonial institutions, uncongenial to republican gov-

ernment, and unwisely left, at the revolution, either for future adjustment, or from inattention to the certain and unfortunate results that must flow from their continuance. With them too have been usually connected, in one shape or other, private rights entitled to protection. Such were the feudal and leasehold tenures of New York—remnants of an age and country in which the relations of property, labor and social intercourse were greatly different from those of republican America, in the nineteenth century. But they were guaranteed by law; they were the foundation of extensive private rights; every attempt violently to subvert them was a public outrage, and a wrong to individuals. Yet such attempts had been made; from small beginnings, some years before, they had assumed by degrees a character scarcely less than revolutionary; riotous assemblages had grown into organized insurrection; and when Mr. Wright became governor, he found in several counties flagrant violations of the rights of persons and property, supported by open and armed resistance to the laws. His first message to the legislature declared his determination and disclosed his policy; to execute the existing laws; firmly to meet and rebuke these proceedings; to confer promptly on the executive all needful means, civil and military; not to discuss the grievances complained of, or their remedies, while the supremacy of the laws was defied. On these principles he resolutely acted, and aided not inconsiderably by the firmness and devotion of the county officers, the judiciary and the citizens; and seconded to some extent by the legislature, he was able, when that body assembled a year afterwards, to report an entire cessation of armed and illegal opposition, in every county of the state. Then, but not till then, did he submit his views on the original subject of complaint. With unanswerable and cogent reasoning, and in the spirit of an enlightened statesman, he recommended changes which, while they should fully protect private rights, would reform the antiquated system from which these misfortunes sprung. In administering, too, his executive functions, while he suffered not crime to escape unpunished, he tempered, with the considerate wisdom which

such an emergency required, the extreme severity of the laws. That in his course through these events, so trying to him as a magistrate, a citizen, and a man, he could escape the censure of those who thought he did too little or too much, he of all men, ever diffident of himself, was among the last to expect; that he did not escape, was proved by the fact that it largely contributed to form the basis of those political combinations which subsequently prevented his re-election. Yet, when he retired, all had become tranquil where disorder had wildly reigned; so far as the changes had been tried that he suggested, they had proved effective: and his conviction was not unreasonable, that a faithful perseverance in his plans by the legislature and the executive must secure permanent harmony to the state.

Nor was this the only great difficulty which he resolutely encountered and overcame, while governor of New York. The wise policy by which at an early day the expenditures for public works had been so limited as to secure, at their outset, the payment of their cost, by a definite tax, and a fixed appropriation of their proceeds when completed, was preserved throughout his administration by an exercise of his constitutional veto; and, what was truly gratifying to him (who so much regretted to be called on for that exercise of an executive privilege,) he saw, before he retired from the public service, these principles deliberately sanctioned by the people, and withdrawn by an amendment of the constitution from all danger of any future legislative infringement. Yet it is not to be doubted that this conduct, wise, patriotic and successful as it was, like his resolute proceedings against the insurrectionary violation of the laws, had its effect in lessening his popularity among portions of the people, with whose interests or opinions it interfered; and that the two mainly contributed to force into retirement the man whose public services were of infinitely more value to his country, than its highest honors were desirable to himself. Can we doubt that no incidents in his past career dwelt more gratefully in his thoughts, or contributed more to brighten and to cheer the residue, alas! too short,

of his virtuous life ? “ I have not had,” he says, in a private letter to a friend, written not long after the election of his opponent, “ one unhappy hour, from the personal consequences of my late defeat ; while it has given me a happiness, in my retirement, that I have not known through many long years of my responsible public service.”

Nor was the change uncongenial to his personal feelings. His long intercourse in public life had never diminished, in the least degree, the warmth of his domestic affections and tastes ; and rural occupations were those he most loved to pursue. With no habits of expense, totally unambitious if not regardless of wealth, he had not accumulated even a moderate fortune. At an early day he had purchased a small farm, near the village of Canton, and though in later years some addition was made to it, yet it was never too large to be cultivated, with only some occasional aid, by his own personal labor. To this he had hastened in every interval of his public service ; to this he now repaired, in the sincere hope that it was to be his permanent abode. “ I am trying,” he says in a letter written about this time to a friend, “ to become a farmer in fact, and have, during this season, labored very steadily. Each day tires me a good deal, but I eat and sleep well, and enjoy a freedom from care and a contentment which are already becoming very dear to me.” In writing, not many weeks before his death, to a friend who was desirous he should visit him, in the state of Maine, he says : “ If I were to attempt to tell you how happy we make ourselves at our retired home, I fear you would scarcely be able to credit me. I even yet realize, every day and every hour, the relief from public cares and perplexities ; and if any thought about temporal affairs could make me more uneasy than another, it would be the serious thought that I was again to take upon myself, in any capacity, that ever-pressing load. I cannot make my visit to you this year. I have become a farmer in earnest, though upon a very humble scale ; and I find little leisure for recreation. Even if my business would permit, I should not dare to travel this year ; as I should be sus-

pected of doing it for sinister purposes, which would destroy to me all the pleasures of the journey, and cause me to be received and treated as a moving beggar—not for food, which might be excused—but for favors I do not ask. After this, I shall be relieved from that embarrassment, and then I hope the time may come when I may visit you, and have the pleasure of fishing with you for cod, without the suspicion of being a fisher of men.”

That these hopes of permanent retirement could have ever been entirely realized, may well be doubted; for what more is needed than the exhibitions of feeling called forth by his death, to prove how generally the thoughts of his countrymen had turned to him as a statesman destined for their highest trust and honors? Though he had not the ambition to covet them; though from them he would willingly have shrunk; yet he was never selfish, nor would he have proved to be indifferent to any obligation that might spring from duty to his country, or respect to the wishes of his friends. But in his tranquil life, now resumed with a brighter promise of continuance than he had ever known before, he seems to have tried to shut out all such prospects; and, in the enjoyment of his humble home, in the cultivation of his farm, in the most friendly, social, cordial intercourse with those around him, (for none were there but friends)—above all, in the peaceful repose of that domestic affection which no circumstance had ever been known to ruffle, he enjoyed the happiness which comes only to him whose desires are moderate; whose spirit is independent and self-relying; whose actions have been generous, disinterested and useful; whose heart has become the abode of virtue, charity and peace. Of his life in retirement, such is a faithful picture. It was passed, it is true, far from the highways of the world, but it could not be hidden from every eye; and, once beheld, it could not be forgotten. From a sketch drawn by one who was often a gratified witness of this scene, we may select a few traits that vividly record, with all the truth of personal observation, the impressions thus made and treasured up. “His house,” Mr. Gillett writes, “is in no wise

distinguished from those of his neighbors; I think it cost him some eight hundred dollars. In all respects he lives in the plain, simple, unostentatious style of the farmers of the town, any one of whom is always met with cheering smiles of welcome at his hospitable threshold. In dress, he is uniformly plain. Except for a brief period in 1834, he has almost always enjoyed robust health. On returning from Washington, he devotes himself, as far as his numerous calls permit, to the cultivation of his garden, and his small farm adjoining the village. When in the field, he labors, like any other farmer, in all the details of business. He cannot be said to have any amusements, although he may sometimes be seen with a fishing rod in his hand. Whatever promotes the substantial interest of his town, is certain to receive his attention. The construction of roads and bridges, the erection of churches and public edifices, are objects that attracted his early care, and have been essentially promoted by the labor of his own hands. Whether in the affairs of his own town, in his own business, or in the council of the nation, he seems, without bustle, display or confusion, to be always in the right place, doing the right thing, and in the best and most suitable manner. No one is more void of selfishness; during my long acquaintance, I have never known him to be laying a plan for pecuniary gain, or personal advancement. His engagements, of every description, he fulfils with scrupulous fidelity. In cases of sickness, he has always been the first to offer his services; and I have known him to walk miles, in stormy weather, over muddy roads, to watch with the sick. No one performs this task more frequently, or more cheerfully. I have never seen the least particle of irritation, nor any manifestation of petulance or ill temper. The most violent assaults of political opponents never disturb him. He is at all times, and on all occasions, the same calm, dignified, respectful man that he is in the Senate of the United States. An unkind word never escapes him. He wounds the feelings of no one. I verily believe he has not a personal enemy in the world. His neighbors who chance to differ with him in politics, esteem and admire him in all the relations of a citizen and a

friend : they feel proud of him and sincerely rejoice at his success, and, but for the strength of partisan ties, would vote for him for any office. When he returns from Congress, you may see the aged and the young, the rich and the poor, flocking to meet him and welcome him home—to congratulate him, and to communicate their good wishes for his prosperity and happiness.”

Such were his conduct, character and life : yet, amid this existence of much loved contentment and peace—in this glad withdrawal from the paths of worldly honors and ambition—he did not seek to wrap himself in the mantle of selfish seclusion ; he regarded with interest not abated whatever affected the prosperity of his country : he cheerfully contributed his counsel or his aid whenever needed by his fellow citizens or friends. Invited, but a short time before his death, to participate in the proceedings of a convention of delegates of the highest respectability, which assembled at Chicago, to promote the improvement of the harbors, rivers and channels of trade in the great west ; and being unable to do so personally : he addressed a communication to it, which is the more interesting as being his last public participation in political affairs ; nor is it less so from the intrinsic wisdom of its counsels. In a movement destined perhaps to be important to the welfare of the Union, he urged at the outset the adoption of those wise principles which, in earlier days, and in a case somewhat similar, we have seen him endeavor to blend indissolubly with the policy of his own State. Heartily approving of the declared objects of the convention, his advice was, that the aim should be to obtain legislative aid only for works affording general and certain benefit, and not uniting with these such as were of a utility merely local : to rest every case on its own separate and intrinsic merit : and, keeping these rules in view, to seek generally, though perhaps not invariably, for the improvement of those avenues where commerce actually exists, rather than the creation of such as would be new. Who can doubt that if these principles shall be adopted and steadily adhered to, they will, on the one hand, justly further the prosperity of the country, while

they avoid, on the other, a wild exercise of doubtful constitutional power, or an unjust extravagance in national expenditure ?

Of his public acts, this was the last connected with political affairs. One other, peculiarly interesting to him, because associated with his own pursuits as well as those of the vast body of his fellow citizens, was arrested, though scarcely before its close, by the hand of death. He had been chosen to deliver the annual address before the Agricultural Association of the State, which was to assemble at Saratoga. To prepare this had been his pleasing occupation during the summer ; his evenings had been chiefly passed, after his daily labors in the garden and the field, in collecting facts which he deemed appropriate and useful ; and he had embodied them in an essay which blends with excellent practical views, suggestions as to the relations and mutual bearing of trade and manufactures on agricultural prosperity, which it is eminently useful to diffuse among an educated and intelligent population, chiefly engaged in rural occupations.

During the evening of the 26th of August, 1847, he employed himself in the last revision of his labor, evincing in it an unabated interest. On the following morning he went, as usual, to the village post office, and, while reading a letter there, he was seized with a sudden and acute pain at the heart. Resting there for a short time, he felt relieved, and calmly walked to his own house, accompanied by several friends and his physician, who had hastened to him. From the first moment of the attack, he seemed to regard it as fatal, though none around him did so. But the composure of his mind remained quite unruffled. Reaching home, he laid himself quietly on his bed, conscious of and grateful for the affectionate attention he received, and the watchful care of those he loved. In two hours afterwards he tranquilly breathed his last. The spirit of unrepining gentleness and contentment—the good genius that never left him in his journey through a world of care, hovered around his last moments, until life departed without a struggle or a pang.

To portray his character, what more is needed than this record, which has aimed to collect, without exaggeration, the story of his

life; what proof of its excellence, beyond the estimation he attained in the hearts and judgment of men? For our age, in which he has lived, and to whose progress and benefit he contributed so much, this indeed is more than sufficient: and to those who shall hereafter seek for the minuter traits of his intellect, his conduct, his temper, and his virtues, we can offer no other delineation so ample, unprejudiced and true. Yet one obligation will remain—to acknowledge the debt due to him by his country and his age for the lessons they are to derive, more eloquent than language, from his bright example. He has taught us that unruffled content may be won: that the loftiest fame may be reached: that social relations, various and refined, may be happily enjoyed: that beneficence may be largely practised, in all its shades of public service and private intercourse—without the possession, nay, without the desire, of fortune beyond the humblest competence. He has taught us that influence, and station, and power, may be used without once seeking to pervert them to a selfish or unworthy purpose: that manly adherence to political opinions, carefully formed and honestly maintained, is never inconsistent with the great obligations of conciliation, forbearance, and generous compromise: that honors declined can confer more happiness and glory than those which are received: that intelligence the brightest, in a sphere the most conspicuous, derives new lustre and wields more power from a modesty always unassuming, and a temper which never wounds: and, above all, that the blessings of domestic life, so endearing and attractive, may ever be preserved unsullied to soothe and cheer the hours most devoted to our country's service. If, indeed, this great and good man exhibited—as who can doubt—the severe virtue, the steady purpose, the devoted patriotism, and the broad philanthropy that marked the character of the Roman statesman, let us not forget that he has taught us to blend with them a spirit more gentle and forbearing—that spirit which should distinguish a people whose bond is one of justice, reason and affection, and to whom have been revealed the divine lessons of a milder and purer faith.



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